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Suburban Sprawl: The Greatest Social Change of Post-World War II America

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Suburban Sprawl: The Greatest Social Change of Post-World War II America

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During World War II, most Americans either lived in cities or rural neighborhoods. However, the end of World War II brought about a new social phenomenon known as the suburbs. These residential communities were sought out by many city residents because they wanted to escape their crowded neighborhoods and find lower cost of land and housing. This occurrence is known as suburban sprawl. The primary analysis of this research is to prove that suburban sprawl is the most important social change after World War II. The effects of suburban sprawl as a social change can be analyzed through five different trends: the history leading up to suburban sprawl, the family and communitarian values of the suburbs, racial relations in the new communities, new governmental and economic aspects in American life, and the recent gentrification of American cities.

Suburban America has its roots from the mid-1850s in New York. These original suburbs were developed by wealthy businessmen and middle-class Romanticists.[1] The idea of a society away from the city valued the rural traditions of Colonial America, only this time in more attractive single-family homes. Llewellyn Park, which is a community in West Orange, NJ, was the first modern suburb and was also home to Thomas Edison.[2] Throughout the later part of the 19th Century and the beginning of the 20th Century, suburbs emerged outside of the cities and rural regions for two different reasons. For the cities, emigration to the suburbs occurred by residents who could afford automobiles and former city inhabitants who could manage to ride the inter-urban railways to their occupations in urban centers.[3] Emigration from rural areas took place because mechanized farming needed less labor and smaller subsistence farms were accumulated

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[1] Thorns, David C. *Suburbia.* London: MacGibbon & Kee Ltd, 1972, 65.
[2] Farnsworth, Christina, B. "Llewellyn Park, West Orange, NJ." *Builder* 10 (2003): 192.
[3] Dobriner, William M. *The Suburban Community.* New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958, 6.

by larger agricultural firms.[4] The pre-World War II era also saw manufacturers relocate from the cities because of advanced services in communications, such as the telephone and electricity. Such innovations enabled the suburban movement to decentralize from the urban centers of the country.[5] Interestingly, the inter-war period of the early American 20th Century did not include the suburban lifestyle that is considered affluent today. Rather, the suburbs were an alternative for the poor to migrate from the impoverished inner cities in order to revitalize their economic status. The biggest town planners during the New Deal, the Regional Planning Association of America (RPAA) and the New Deal Resettlement Administration, aspired to build satellite towns outside of the cities so that poor people could afford low-cost housing.[6] However, President Franklin Roosevelt's Greenbelt Experiment, which included Greenbelt, Maryland, Greenhills, Ohio, and Greendales, Wisconsin, eventually failed because many of the people who moved from the cities to the satellite towns were middle-class whites and not poor inner city residents.[7]

After World War II, many families made their way to the suburbs. This trend has been so consistent throughout the last fifty years that about 46% of Americans live in a suburban neighborhood today. Two reasons why suburban sprawl became a popular inclination after World War II are that housing was cheaper in the satellite neighborhoods due to New Deal legislation (which provided alternatives to high-priced luxury apartments in the city) and that propaganda influenced women to move into new communities, portraying them in a matriarchal position rather than as a member of the work force, of which many women were apart during World War II.[8] Considering that the New Deal ultimately did not fund many programs for affordable housing, cheap land had to be bought all over the country to support the large influx of veterans returning home who were without homes and occupations and their burgeoning baby-boomer families. Perhaps the best example for describing the conditions of suburban projects in post-World War II America is Levittown, New York. Based in Long Island, the houses, which were so similar that they almost seemed like a mirage, were built by Abraham Levitt's *Levitt and Sons Company*. These houses were built strictly for veterans and cost sixty-dollars per month to rent.[9] There was obviously striking features and opportunity for Levittown residents, considering it took an extra 15 hours of commuting each week to get to New York City via public transportation. The attractiveness of Levittown in the post-World War II era can be summed up as a getaway from the crowded city, an opportunity for the youth to flourish, and a chance for only white residents to burgeon through segregation.[10]

In addition to the original suburban "white paradise," the next wave of suburban sprawl came in the late 1950s, only this time racism was the definitive factor for Caucasians to leave the cities for new residential neighborhoods. Furthermore, the Lyons

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[4] Ibid. 7.
[5] Clapson, Mark. *Suburban Century: Social Change and Urban Growth in England and the USA*. Oxford: Berg, 2003, 29.
[6] Ibid. 41.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ullman, John E. *The Suburban Economic Network: Economic Activity, Resource Use, and the Great Sprawl*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977, 8.
[9] Dobriner, William M. *The Suburban Community*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958, 288.
[10] Ibid. 289-306.

Act was repealed in 1962, stating that New York employees no longer had to live within the city limits.[11] This allowed more whites to move to the suburbs, which required larger homes and higher taxes because a more affluent influx of former city Caucasians were moving into the neighborhoods. Many women had to return to work in order for the suburbanites from the first wave of the sprawl to afford the higher costs of living, and also for the new suburbanites to maintain their standards of living. This was a contradiction to the original propagandist portrayal of women's role in the suburbs.[12]

Sociologists often state that values begin in the household. In the suburbs, a whole new set of values began to emerge in American culture. The values of the family and the community are a dichotomous microcosm of society. First, the defense of suburban values must be examined. As mentioned earlier, suburban sprawl has its roots in the Romantic ideology of a paradise away from the cities. Throughout the 20th Century drift of suburban sprawl, many families enjoyed the concept of a small community, which is assessed in Classical Greece as the pinnacle of values. The miniscule community is also glorified through the local cantons of Switzerland by famed philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau as "the purest representation of democracy and liberty."[13] Suburbanites also value social mobility, which is evident because many of them moved from working class or proletariat to middle-class life. Many middle-class citizens who would be considered working class, such as mechanics, have become assimilated into the community of their occupation. For example, the World War II period brought a sense of community to the workforce, as cafeterias and locker rooms were added, features that previously only existed in white collar business.[14] Furthermore, working families making middle-class salaries were able to afford higher priced goods that were previously only available to the upper class.

Along with the exaltation of status among suburbanites, the values that the suburbs have embraced are arguably detrimental to the foundation of America as a whole. One of the biggest problems with suburban values is the iconization of the individual in society. The assessment of the self has neglected the community because many people who favor the advancement of the individual crave the benefits of a small town ideology where they feel the state exists for their own personal benefit.[15] Furthermore, while many suburbs try to remain separate from their metropolitan cities, they are in essence dependent upon them. The best example of this dependence is the railroad suburbs of Philadelphia. Such railroad suburbs as Chestnut Hill proved to be examples of a "bourgeois utopia," where executives such as Germantown's Henry Howard Houston (executive of Pennsylvania Railroad) sought to build a getaway of picturesque rural imagery with an elitist domicile while still relying on the city for income.[16] The railroad, which was a connection between the city and the suburbs, also remained as a defense of

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[11] Ullman, John E. *The Suburban Economic Network: Economic Activity, Resource Use, and the Great Sprawl.* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1977, 13.
[12] Ibid. 14.
[13] Wood, Robert C. *Suburbia: Its People and Its Politics.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958, 261.
[14] Tietze, Frederick J. and McKeown, James E. *The Changing Metropolis.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company , 1968, 153.
[15] Wood, Robert C. *Suburbia: Its People and Its Politics.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958, 263.
[16] Fishman, Robert. *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia.* New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1987, 142-143.

American values against European immigrants.[17] Philadelphia noble Owen Wister's anti-Semitic description of the Jewish influx in the city is a reflection of American society's feelings against such immigrants, as he stated, "no rood of modern ground is more debased and mongrel with its hordes of encroaching alien vermin, that turn our cities into Babels and our citizenship into a hybrid farce, who degrade our commonwealth from a nation into something half-pawnshop, half broker's office."[18]

Unfortunately, many racist tendencies exist in the suburbs to this day, which is evident primarily through the treatment of African-Americans. The racial problem of the suburbs, which can be perceived as a "new society" in America, is a reflection of the American macrocosm's plague of discrimination. Two methods suburban businesses and citizens have used to keep blacks out of the suburbs are zoning regulations and virtually terrorist tactics. Developers of urban expansion to the suburbs combined real estate development to include home construction and land division, which allowed these new suburban businessmen to develop their own segregation codes.[19] Being that segregation laws were still in effect from *Plessy v. Ferguson*, private individuals were allowed to restrict any race from occupying their leased property. White residents in the suburbs also resorted to terrorist tactics, as house bombings and arsons victimized black families. These attacks occurred in middle-class neighborhoods such as Cleveland Heights, Ohio and White Plains, New York as a means to scare away the black residents of the suburbs.[20] Another tactic against black suburbanites was carried out by suburban government officials, this time targeting existing black communities in the suburbs. Many of these families were often working-class civilians who moved to the newly developed suburbs after World War II. Some of these African-American communities even existed from the days of free black slaves. Probably the best model for exemplifying the displacement of African-American suburban communities is in Long Island, New York, where many railroad communities existed from the days of the former slaves' Great Migration to the North.[21] The displacement of black communities in Long Island occurred when white families in New York began to emigrate outside of the city after World War II. Once a vast majority of whites began to move into municipalities with established black districts, local governments began to enhance housing codes and evict black residents after they condemned their neighborhoods.[22] Furthermore, state governments, federal funding, and privatization provided local governments with the capabilities of developing neighborhoods that were considered condemned, which tore down and rebuilt black communities and replaced them with white neighborhoods.[23] A more recent example is the economic resurgence in Harlem, New York, where the cost of an apartment has risen 415% from 1995-2004.[24] Many working and lower class residents of Harlem can no longer afford to move into the neighborhood. Possibly, much of the

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[17] Ibid. 153.
[18] Ibid. 153-154.
[19] Wiese, Andrew. *Places of Their Own: African-American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004, 42.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid. 104-105.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Robertson, Tatsha. Harlem on the Rise. *The Crisis* (112), 6.

culture from the original Harlem Renaissance might be replaced by a new revival, which has already started to include businesses like Starbucks and Old Navy.

A fourth social change brought about by suburban sprawl is the governmental and economic aspects of American suburban society. Arguably the most intriguing aspect of suburbanization, despite its history of racism and classism, is that the governments can best serve the interests of the local populace because they remain "closer to home," which is the ideology of old New England grassroots democracy from the days of colonial America.[25] Although suburban governments manage their districts the same way rural and urban governments do in their areas, many suburbanites have cited that the smaller populations in their communities prevent corruption that exists in larger cities. The disengagement of suburban societies from their governing city can be exemplified through Chicago, where 89 municipalities developed by the early 20th Century, leading to satisfaction with suburban governments for many small communities which had been previously forced to incorporate into Chicago because they could not provide services such as water, sewage, and police protection.[26] Another aspect of the Chicago suburbs is the separate paths taken by different districts in governing their societies. For example, the working-class neighborhood of Cicero became corrupted by Al Capone's Chicago Mob during the 1920s and became a haven for gangster residents, while elite suburbs such as Glencoe banned saloons and pushed to have their administration run by a city manager.[27] However, many suburban governments after World War II would face the same problem Chicago's early village communities did in the mid-late Nineteenth Century, which was financing and administering their governments after separating from their city government. The greatest problem with suburban governments is expenditures for programs like public safety and education. Spending has been such a problem for the suburbs because they do not have the resources of a large city or the subsidies from the federal government to finance public safety, education, and waste disposal. An example of this problem can be seen in Macomb, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit. Macomb, which like many suburbs is not drawing more industry, cannot afford essential public services like police protection because the voters are going against the new service plan in light of higher taxes.[28]

The economic situations in suburban America are largely divided among the immediate metropolitan area. Three forms of economic activity are the core (central business district and multiple family apartments), the Inner Ring of Industry (strip malls and medium-sized stores), and the Outer Ring of Industry (small stores and single family apartments).[29] After World War II, families were able to thrive in the suburbs because they were able to work less hours and earn more money, which enabled suburbanites to have more children. In fact, the growth in real disposable income rose from $576 per person in 1940 to $1708 per person in 1956.[30] However, the increasing economic prosperity would lead to problems with the environment, agriculture, and the cost of living for veteran suburbanites. The influx of people to the suburbs has largely been a

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[25] Dobriner, William M. *The Suburban Community*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1958, 166.
[26] Encyclopedia of Chicago. *Government, Suburban.* [updated 01 January 2005; cited 04 November 2005]. Available from http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/534.html.
[27] Ibid.
[28] http://www.detnews.com/2002/metro/0208/13/a01-560652.htm
[29] Ibid. 181.
[30] Ibid. 183.

corollary to the popularity of the automobile, which has become an increasingly greater problem in the suburbs. Land allotment has resulted in the incursion of transportation because highways and parking lots have had to increase with more automobiles in the suburbs, often decreasing open and preserved space. Agricultural problems have emerged because suburban sprawl depleted the rural space available for farming, forcing lower value crops such as dairy to move to other locations while more metropolitan agricultural industries such as horticulture and truck gardening were able to remain.[31] Finally, the cost of living for veterans and original suburbanites has increased because when they moved to the suburbs after World War II the land was much cheaper and the rent was very low. Now that more affluent citizens have moved to the suburbs, veterans and senior citizens in the suburbs often get into debt because of the high property values, which often leads to them tightening up on their spending.

The fifth change in American society from suburban sprawl is gentrification, or the demolition and rebuilding of dilapidated neighborhoods into communities for the upper middle-class. This phenomenon occurred frequently in the suburbs after World War II, but the new wave of gentrification is occurring in smaller cities once plagued by crime, such as Hoboken, New Jersey or Williamsburg, Brooklyn. While gentrification usually "fixes up" neighborhoods, the increased property values and costs of living often force the working class and the lower class to move out because they can no longer afford to live in that community, often resulting in shifts to more dangerous neighborhoods. Many residents who move into redeveloped communities are called "yuppies," or Young Urban Professionals, who are either from the baby-boomer generation or the younger twenties and thirties age group of Corporate America workers. Arguably the greatest problem with gentrification is the complete disposal of the neighborhood.[32] Many gentrified neighborhoods are so similar and are home to such a mobile group of people that community has become private and temporary. Being that many of these new neighborhoods are cheaper than living in a major city like New York, people simply spend little time in their residential community because they are either working or commuting. The removal of long-term residents, often of a lower income, and the arrival of new, more affluent residents, is causing another economic and cultural gap that could plague America in a sense of class warfare, which could be similar to the racism difficulty.

Suburban sprawl is not just the greatest social change in America after World War II because so many Americans moved to communities that rarely existed, but because the sprawl has reflected American society through economic opportunities, governing, racism, and family values. Furthermore, suburban sprawl represents the possibilities of future problems that could hurt America, such as classism and gentrification. The future of sprawl is beginning to receive anti-sentiment, even among the original citizens of the suburban sprawl. While politicians, including Presidential candidates, have begun to speak out against sprawl, developers are continuing to build in the suburbs.[33] Although suburban sprawl is not necessarily negative, the continuity of the sprawl will affect

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[31] Ibid. 185.

[32] Marshall, Alex. *How Cities Work: Suburbs, Sprawl, and the Roads No Taken.* Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2000, 188-189.

[33] Duany, Andres, Plater-Zyberk, Elizabeth, and Speck, Jeff. *Suburban Nation: The Rise of Sprawl and the Decline of the American Dream.* New York: North Point Press, 2000, 216.

America through higher costs of living and a loss of community. Much like Americans found ways to unite through crises such as September 11th, individuals can also regain their quality of life by realizing how much their surrounding environment affects them.[34]

[34] Ibid. 240.

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